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Photos: Hakatai Enterprises

Glass tile expands design options for colorful, unique applications

By Ron Treister

In the last two decades, glass tiles have become popular as field and accent tiles within the commercial construction arena. This trend can be attributed to certain

technological breakthroughs, as well as to the inherent properties of glass tile. In particular, how they are able to be produced with more intense color than other tiles, their ability to reflect light and, their imperviousness to water.

Glass tiles, when installed by profession-

al contractors using the correct installation systems, offer floor and/or wall cladding, which is ideal for a multitude of commercial venues. Additionally, glass tile provides rich, vibrant colors combined with a surface that does not allow water to seep through and damage any underlying substrates.

Relative to today's ecology movement, a number of glass tile production technologies, which include processes that incorporate used glass and recreate it as green tiles, have resulted in an even greater interest in glass tile as both floor and wall cladding. These materials are now commonly used in commercial kitchens, spas, boutiques, food

courts, public bathrooms and other commercial applications.

Another interesting production treatment has resulted in special glass tiles coated on the back side with a receptive white finishing. This has allowed impregnation of heat-transfer dyes by a printing process reproducing high-resolution pictures and designs. Custom-printed glass tile and glass tile murals exhibit the toughness of glass on the wearing surface with photo-like pictures. These are especially practical in areas of high humidity, where cleanser and moisture resistance are important.

And of course, there are glass mosaics. Smalti tile, which some-



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times is referred to as Byzantine glass mosaic tile, consists typically of opaque glass tiles originally developed for use in mosaic designs first seen during the time of the Byzantine Empire. Smalti is made by mixing molten glass with metal oxides for color; the result is a

cloudy mixture that is poured into flat slabs that are cooled and broken into individual pieces. The molten mixture can also be topped with gold leaf, followed by a thin glass film to protect against tarnishing. Since the 1920s mass production techniques have been used in pro-

ducing glass mosaic tiles, where molten liquid is poured and cooled in trays, usually resulting in small glass pieces that are mesh-backed, paper- or film-faced, or more recently dot-mounted for ease of installation.

Clearly the most focal of all glass mosaic work seen today in various commercial settings is that of glass mosaic murals. Generally speaking, once specific visual concepts are created, talented mosaic specialists are able to turn any drawing or design into a hand-cut, hand-aligned, fine art mosaic mural. Quite frankly, each custom mural is a one-of-a-kind work of art. These mosaic artists have an unlimited palette of mosaic colors and tile types to choose from, including Venetian glass, Smalti, gold leaf and even marble and stone. This limitless selection of materials, in combination with excellent mosaic craftsmanship, allows for stunning simulations of the various textures, colors and detailed shadings in the original artwork. Glass tile mosaic murals are becoming more and more widespread in theme restaurants as well as in health-care facilities.

According to **Dorian Cummings**, project manager at **Hakatai Enterprises**, a supplier of glass tile, "Architects and designers have used glass tile in their commercial design ideas for a number of years. I believe the main reason is that glass tile provides countless colors and styles that enhance creative installation ideas and designs while maintaining durable functionality."

Glass tile should not be installed by an amateur. Since the material is impervious, it requires good mortar mixing and mortar spreading techniques, as well as consistent and accurate tile placement. According to industry experts, many installers have had bad



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experiences with glass tiles losing bond, generally because they did not use quality liquid latex-fortified Portland cement mortars. Impervious tiles such as glass require a thin-set mortar with very tenacious bond strength. Simple dry-set mortars and most low-end, multi-purpose thin-set mortars do not have the bond strength to ensure a good grip to the glass surface.

So whether your next project is a retail store roll-out, the reception area of a contemporary resort, a large wall in a major city's subway station or anything else where beautiful colors, protection from water intrusion and ease of surface maintenance is key, think about including one of the most time-honored materials in your designs — glass tile. **CCM**

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